

BOOK REVIEWS

THE ADVENTURES OF A PARAPSYCHOLOGIST by Susan Blackmore. Prometheus Books, Buffalo, New York, 1986. 249 pp. \$19.95.*

There can be few readers of this journal to whom the name of Susan Blackmore is not familiar. For many years she has been a regular contributor to this journal, she is often to be heard at conferences and study-days, she is active in the affairs of the Society of which she is a council member and she is the leading authority in this country on the out-of-body experience. It may come as a surprise, therefore, to some readers to see her book appearing under an imprint commonly associated with our enemies. But this nicely illustrates what I would call the paradox of her situation. She has this avowed passion for parapsychology, she is even fond of parapsychologists, but she has ceased to believe that there is such a thing as 'psi'. What she calls her 'adventures' are the sequence of events that have led to her scepticism and disillusionment. It says much for her personal qualities that there is so little trace of bitterness and that she has managed to remain on the best of terms with most members of the world-wide parapsychological community. In the end, she resolves her personal dilemma by advocating a new kind of parapsychology which, while still doing justice to the strange and marvellous experiences which were its point of departure, would no longer need to invoke anything paranormal.

Is there, indeed, scope for such a new model parapsychology? And is she justified in rejecting psi? These are the key questions which preoccupy her in this book and we leave her still hesitating to make any final commitment but having achieved a kind of serenity with the insight that it would be unreasonable for her to expect to know all the answers. She concludes the book with the words: 'One answer would do. I don't know, I don't know, *I don't know!*'.

A book as outspoken as this deserves a no less frank review. I will start by confessing that I was captivated. She displays an exuberance and a youthful *joie-de-vivre* that I found disarming and there can be no denying that she does know how to write. She has the writer's gift of being able to relive the various incidents of her life and to make the reader share something of the hopes, joys and anguish which these invoke. She can also regale us with glimpses of the various people that are involved. It is not, however, the literary merits of the book that will concern us here. Sifting through my vocabulary for a suitable epithet it struck me that she is our true *enfant terrible*. She dares to say out loud what all of us must from time to time think, namely that the emperor has no clothes, that there is no psi. Moreover she has taken a close look, that is to say she has earned her scepticism the hard way from the inside rather than from afar. But, lest I sound patronizing, let me add that she is in earnest and her message is one that no parapsychologist can afford to treat lightly. No one before has articulated so incisively the peculiar exasperation of the career parapsychologist forever striving after some tangible progress. I have myself acquired a reputation as a negative experimenter but reading Blackmore confirms my suspicion that

* The book is obtainable in this country by writing to: Prometheus Books, 10 Crescent Avenue, Loughton IG10 4PZ enclosing cheque for £15.95 to cover postage.

my own experience is all too common and that it is the successful experimenters that are so exceptional as automatically to arouse suspicion. But is the remedy to concentrate on why so many people *believe* in the paranormal and stop trying to prove that such phenomena exist?

Explaining-away has always been an important component of psychical research and our Society is proud of its critical tradition and contemptuous of an easy-going credulity. Indeed, the kind of parapsychology she envisages already has an honourable history. In the late 19th century it would have come under the rubric of abnormal psychology. The pioneers of psychical research, like Frederic Myers, felt at home among the psychologists who were then exploring the workings of the unconscious, hypnosis, motor automatisms, multiple personality, hallucinations and suchlike topics. Recently, the expression 'anomalous psychology' has gained some currency.¹ There is a science of 'what looks like psi but is not', to borrow a phrase from Robert Morris² and her own Chapter 25 'The Power of Belief' is a worthy contribution to this science. Indeed, another leading parapsychologist, John Palmer, has recently gone on record in support of the view that there need be no conflict between the so-called 'sceptic' and the so-called 'believer'. As he sees it, both are equally concerned with 'ostensible psychic events' the only difference being that the former expect to be able to interpret them without departing from what Palmer calls 'conventional theory'.³

All the same, it is not easy to dispel the suspicion that such a sanitised parapsychology would be a case of the bathwater without the baby. Of course, if there is no baby then bathwater may be all that there is on offer. But there are at least two weaknesses in her analysis which cast doubt upon this conclusion. In the first place she betrays a curious lack of historical perspective. It is symptomatic that the only historical work she cites in her bibliography, apart from Alan Gauld's *The Founders of Psychical Research*, is Ruth Brandon's *The Spiritualists*. This aspect of the book struck me all the more forcibly for my having recently had the occasion to review Stephen Braude's *The Limits of Influence* (see the issue for Jan. 1987). Braude, for his part, dismisses the experimental evidence almost with a wave of the hand and bases his acceptance of the reality of psi on the records of the performances of a number of exceptional individuals. No doubt many of these star performers had a seamy side that inevitably fans our misgivings but this was not always the case. Are we to imagine, for example, that, when Stefan Ossowiecki was killed in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, he was still laughing up his sleeve to think of all the savants of Europe whom he had hoodwinked in a long and mischievous career and was he gloating at the thought of all the mystification he would bequeath to posterity? On the no-psi hypothesis questions such as these cannot be evaded. And what about the young Rudi Schneider? Dr. Blackmore must have known well the late Anita Gregory who devoted a lifetime of historical research into his mediumship. Did she ever discuss with her the possibility that Rudi may have fooled Eugene Osty in Paris or Charles Hope in London? And, if he did, then who and where was the clever

¹ See L. Zusne & W. H. Jones *Anomalous Psychology* Hillsdale, N. J.: L. Erlbaum. 1982.

² See R. L. Morris What psi is not: the necessity for experiments. In H. L. Edge, R. L. Morris, J. H. Rush & J. Palmer *Foundations of Parapsychology* Boston, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1986.

³ See J. Palmer Progressive skepticism: a critical approach to the psi controversy. *JP* 50, 1986, 29-42.

confederate since Rudi himself, by all accounts, was flat out in a trance throughout every seance? If the author did give any thought to these questions she does not let on. On the other hand, what are we to say to her if she retaliates by asking why there are no longer any such exceptional individuals around?

The other weakness lies in her metaphysical assumptions. Again and again she bemoans the fact that we cannot rely on being able to reproduce a given psi effect in the laboratory. As she nicely puts it, the nonrepeatability of psi is parapsychology's only repeatable finding! But, while this may well be the gravest handicap in gaining a wider acceptance of the phenomena, it is arguable whether such a criterion is relevant outside the domain of the hard sciences. Likewise, she makes much of the fact that, even after a hundred years of research psi has still to be defined operationally in purely negative terms. What she fails to make explicit, however, is her unquestioning commitment to the physicalist world view according to which all phenomena can ultimately be explained in terms of the laws of physics so that psi phenomena can at most be temporary anomalies awaiting incorporation in some extended physics of the future. And yet the dominant tradition in psychical research has always regarded psi as making sense only within a dualist ontology. Might it not be, for example, that psi arises from the fact that mind can directly influence matter and matter mind? Normally these interactions would be confined to the mind-brain system where they would be going on all the time. Once in a while, however, they may spill over into the environment and it is only then that they would count as 'paranormal' within the terms of the accepted definition. Since there are, presumably, good biological reasons why psi should be confined to one's own body we should expect such exosomatic events to be rare and unpredictable, like, let us say, the derailment of a locomotive on British Rail. Now, one may reject such an interpretation but one would be foolish to ignore it.

We leave the author with most of her professional life still ahead of her. Whatever direction it takes we can only hope that it will not remove her from the field altogether. We need the stimulus of her ever restless and inquiring mind.

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SORRY—YOU'VE BEEN DUPED. THE TRUTH BEHIND CLASSIC MYSTERIES OF THE PARANORMAL by Melvin Harris. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1986. 194 pp. £9.95.

This debunking book lacks bibliography or index and is unashamedly journalistic in style, nevertheless it is the product of much careful inquiry. The dubious origins of stories of allegedly paranormal events that have gained undeserved publicity and credence are mercilessly tracked down. Many of the examples illustrate how spurious, sensation seeking versions of events put about by unscrupulous writers are taken up by others and elaborated and repeated over the years until fiction becomes mistaken for historical fact. The Amityville